

Census expected to cost \$660-million, says Statistics Canada

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The Hill Times
Published June 29, 2011

PARLIAMENT HILL—This year's census and the controversial voluntary household survey accompanying it are expected to cost a total of \$660-million from planning and preparation to end stages in 2015, Statistics Canada says.

But the agency declined to provide *The Hill Times* with an exact comparison to the cost of the last census in 2006, following the uproar last year over the Harper government's decision to cancel the mandatory long-form version of the census and replace it with the voluntary survey. Despite the limited response, the figures Statistics Canada provided suggest the census this year will cost nearly \$50-million more than in 2006, even when both years are expressed in 2010 dollars.

A breakdown of costs the agency provided *The Hill Times*, however, included a "contingency fund" of \$30-million to ensure "adequate response levels" are met, primarily for the remaining mandatory census, out of concern citizens will be confused over which form they must fill out, facing penalties if they don't, and the voluntary longer survey.

But, without disclosing the actual costs of the last census, saying instead it cost a total \$613-million in 2010 dollars, the agency said in a series of emailed answers to questions that the survey this year will actually cost less than it did in 2006—\$43.44 per household compared to \$45.20 in 2010 dollars.

Despite those figures, however, Statistics Canada, through spokesperson Peter Frayne, head of media relations, said the 2011 census had already cost \$247-million for planning and preparation stages from April 1, 2008, to March 31, 2011.

Mr. Frayne said on one of the emails that the census, combined with the separate national household survey, which took place in May, will cost a further \$326-million during the current fiscal year, which ends next March 31, and another \$87-million to March 31, 2015.

Mr. Frayne did not respond to a request to furnish that breakdown for the 2006 census year and, after only four requests from *The Hill Times* for elaboration on earlier responses,

telephoned to say the agency would not be able to respond to more questions, although Mr. Frayne did provide one more additional elaboration on a point that was unclear.

Mr. Frayne said Statistics Canada could not isolate the cost of the new household survey, which is being sent to one-third of the 15.2 million households the census is reaching this year. "Operations for the census and the national household survey are highly integrated and it is impossible to break out costs separately," Mr. Frayne said in an email at the beginning of the exchange.

Liberal MP Geoff Regan (Halifax West, N.S.), his party's critic for Industry Canada and Statistics Canada, a branch in the department, said Statistics Canada should be more explicit about the cost of the census, in light of the controversy last year over the decision by then Industry minister Tony Clement (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.), now Treasury Board president, to scrap the mandatory long-form census.

At the time, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) argued it was wrong for the government to use the threat of penalties and legal action to compel citizens to fill out the forms, which consisted of more extensive and, Mr. Harper argued, intrusive questions than the short form of the census.

"They're almost \$50-million over that [2006 cost], that's a lot of money," Mr. Regan told *The Hill Times*. "The problem is not only is this costing more, but we're not even sure the information is going to be reliable."

Mr. Regan said he was also surprised that Statistics Canada decided to arbitrarily cut off responses to emailed questions, and did not reply to a request for a personal interview for further explanation of the emailed responses.

"You have to ask yourself, does this mean that the bosses in the PMO are interfering with disclosure of information? Are they trying to hide something?" said Mr. Regan, adding that the House of Commons Industry Committee should conduct a hearing into the census costs when Parliament reconvenes in September.

Ivan Felligi, a retired head of Statistics Canada, told *The Hill Times* even though the voluntary survey is being delivered to more households, one out of three compared to one out of five for the previous mandatory long form census, Statistics Canada privately understands the information will be less reliable.

"They expect the number of responses to be much lower," Mr. Felligi said. "It was 94 per cent in the past and the operational assumption was 50 per cent this time."

Mr. Felligi added that the contingency of \$30-million is required for the work required to inform and convince people the shorter census form is mandatory.

“In the case of the short form, there was concern that the voluntary nature of what was the long form will confuse people, and they will think the short form is also voluntary, which it isn’t,” he said.

“They know perfectly well, and everybody knows, that the voluntary survey, the NHS, is going to have a much lower response rate than the compulsory long form did, but how much less, nobody knows. They’ll try to do their best to boost the response rate by doing some follow-up.”

He said there is a danger of “contamination of publicity on the short form, which is now the only census form.”